

# **I Know Someday I'll Make It Out Of Here (Even If It Takes All Night Or A Hundred Years) by Constant\_Crisis, MisterTiberius**

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**Summary:**

Steve carefully stepped over the ooze slathered across the floor, creeping up to the wall separating the living room from the kitchen. The golden light from the small bulb spilled out onto a small portion of the tiled floor of the dining room and kitchen, softly illuminating the surrounding area in an eerie glow. He peeked around the corner

in order to peer into the kitchen and his eyebrows furrowed in confusion upon seeing the absolute mess of the place.

His various plastic magnets were scattered across the floor, some cracked and in pieces as if they'd been stepped on. Wrappers and shredded tupperware were strewn about with half-eaten and abandoned scraps of food left haphazardly everywhere. He was so furious at the sight of the absolute disaster he almost missed the figure rummaging about his fridge. Examining the little bit of the silhouette he could see, he stared wide-eyed at the gap between the bare fridge door and the floor, where he could see a pair of slimy feet.

# 1. Chapter 1

Steve's consciousness reluctantly emerged from the fog of sleep, which sucked, because getting through a full night without dreaming up some nightmare scenario or another was next to impossible nowadays. Steve lazily cracked an eye open, groggily squinting at the familiar layout of his bedroom. Nothing looked out of place, which only left him even more puzzled. He focused on his body and found that his heartbeat was perfectly steady and his breathing was even. So, if he wasn't awake because of another nightmare...

Then what woke him up?

His question was answered in the form of a muffled clatter that came from the apartment beyond his door, the sound prompting him to quietly climb out from beneath his warm blankets and retrieve his trusty spiked bat from where he'd stashed it under the bed. Robin had gone out for yet another date with a cute girl named Hannah that she'd met at a poetry reading and had told him not to expect her to return to their apartment until well into the morning.

Steve considered the preferable scenario where Robin had changed her mind and came back early, but she would've called to warn him of her imminent return just in case he was... *busy*. Surely he would've heard their landline ring, he was an incredibly light sleeper since he'd found out about the Upside Down and all the things that came with the territory. Which could only mean that Robin didn't call, and that indicated that the second -and much more distressing- option was the most likely one.

He had an uninvited visitor, which was unexpected because their apartment wasn't in a particularly bad neighborhood.

Sure, it wasn't like there had *never* been a break-in that was in the area, it's just that...Steve had never thought it would happen to *them*. He and Robin didn't have a whole lot of stuff that was worth stealing, other than their hard-earned TV of course. Though, even then it would be pretty difficult to take considering the fact that the thing was *heavy*. Like ridiculously so, to the point where he and Robin had struggled to get the appliance up the flight of stairs and into their

living room.

His train of thought was derailed by the almost inaudible sound of his fridge door opening. The noise reminding him as to why he was standing stiffly in the cold corridor. He took a step forward, moving out of the hall and into the living room, his foot slipping slightly as it came in contact with the wet hardwood floor. Looking down, the meager light of the street lamps shining through the windows allowed him to see some sort of slime smeared across the ground, the puddles parallel and evenly spaced like footprints.

His gaze tracked the path back to his right, the prints beginning in front of the wall next to his TV. The off-white wall was just as pristine as it had been when they had moved into the apartment, with no sign of tampering. It was as if the prints had just appeared out of nowhere. Memories of gateways to other dimensions and the creatures that followed flashed through his mind before he viciously stomped down the reminder. He hoped *-prayed-* that this had nothing to do with the Upside Down.

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His various plastic magnets were scattered across the floor, some cracked and in pieces as if they'd been stepped on. Wrappers and shredded Tupperware was strewn about with half-eaten and abandoned scraps of food left haphazardly *everywhere*. He was so furious at the sight of the absolute disaster he almost missed the figure rummaging about his fridge. Examining the little bit of the silhouette he could see, he stared wide-eyed at the gap between the bare fridge door and the floor, where he could see a pair of slimy feet.

Although, it took him a second to register that what he was staring at weren't *feet* at all but *talons*, ones that looked freakishly akin to something one might see on a bird as opposed to something distinctly

human-sized. Steve must've made some kind of noise, because the nightmare-inducing crunching abruptly cut off, the shadowed figure straightening from its hunched form in order to stare at him from over the fridge door.

Some sort of swinging metal caught in the yellow light of the fridge, giving Steve a good eyeful of an eerily familiar earring. Unfortunately, Harrington had only seen that particular earring on *one* person. A recognizable pair of bright blue iris' swam in dark pools of black, lazily raking over Steve's frame. After an uncomfortable moment of mutual staring, the other male's petal pink lips curled up into an unsettling grin that showed off inhuman needle-point teeth. Regrettably, Harrington would recognize that smug face *anywhere* and *jesus fuck-*

It's Billy Hargrove.

A *dead man* is standing in Steve's kitchen, a half-devoured rotisserie chicken held in the loose curl of his...fingers? At least, that's what they *resembled* . They were more like claws, Billy's usual sun-kissed tan skin steadily fading into a smooth matte black from his elbows down to the tips of his fingers. Unsure of what else to do, Steve wound up and viciously swung at the Billy look-alike, who swiftly ducked to avoid the deadly spikes that were periodically scattered throughout the wood.

"Hey! *Hey!* Easy, Pretty Boy. It's me, Billy." It drawled and Steve's lips twisted into a scowl at the casual use of the degrading nickname, anger rearing its ugly head at this... *impostor's* words. Harrington knew it wasn't Hargrove because there was *no way* Billy would come looking for *Steve* of all people. Max maybe -perhaps even El- but certainly not *him*. "I don't know *what* you are, but I know for a *fact* that you're not Hargrove. He's dead. I *watched* him die." Steve swallowed heavily, ignoring how his voice cracked.

The look-alike's face creased with exasperation, the creature clicking its tongue in clear disagreement. "Well that's kind of impossible considering that I'm *right here*." It both looked *and* sounded completely done with Harrington's perfectly *valid* argument, thank you. "He's *dead*." Steve repeated, for lack of anything else to say. "No, *I'm not*." The impostor stressed, frustration bleeding into its

tone. The creature carelessly tossed the half-eaten carcass of the chicken onto the nearest counter before taking an aborted step forward, causing Steve to jerk back and ready his bat.

Harrington planted a solid hit right on the look-alike's chest, a flash of metal drawing his gaze down to where nails met flesh. The thin gold chain around the impostor's neck had gotten tangled around the bat, the delicate jewelry snapping when Steve yanked it away. The familiar necklace dangled from the black-coated nails, glinting insidiously as it swayed with Harrington's trembling hands. It was Billy's. Steve suddenly recalled the day that he'd finally gathered enough courage to ask Max about the jewelry's significance, she had told him that it used to belong to Hargrove's estranged *mother*.

Harrington tore his eyes away from the necklace, braving a glance at Billy. He instantly wished he hadn't, a cold chill running down Steve's spine at Hargrove's severe expression. It was the same look he'd had that night at the Byers house, the night that Billy had attempted to *beat* him to death. Steve flinched when those crazed arctic eyes moved from the necklace to hone in on him, prompting Harrington to drop the bat as if it had burned him. The crack of wood hitting wood was deafeningly loud, the sound ringing in Steve's ears like a gunshot.

He immediately clapped his hands over the abused appendages, hoping that it would at least muffle the noise. On the contrary, it just seemed to grow louder and *louder* until it was the only thing he could hear. The distant crash of a plate shattering broke through the white noise, Steve's hands dropping away from his head as he felt the pieces of porcelain rain down around him. The left side of his skull throbbed in time with his frantic heartbeat as he flashed through memories of Billy kneeling over him, pinning him to the ground as blow after blow landed.

Steve couldn't breathe, choking on the thick metallic flavor that flooded his mouth. His aching eyes squinted open, his pained gaze meeting the manic grin on Billy's face as the younger boy kept throwing punches. Every inch of his body hurt, he could feel his skin split, bruise, swell up. Billy's unhinged laughter echoed throughout the Byer's living room, as if it were coming from all around him. Then there were hands on him, pressed against the back of his head.

He flinched away, but the hands were persistent and they weren't hurting him, so he gave in to the instinct to lean into the gentle touch. His breathing slowed some, the ringing lessening in volume until he could actually hear a voice.

“Hey, Steve, *hey*. Stop that.” The fingers moved lightly over the back of his head and he hissed as it ran across a painful bump. The prodding hand came back around and paused in front of his face, a bright crimson coating the tips of the pointer and middle finger that Steve distantly registered as *his* blood. He focused his vision past the hand and to the figure crouched before him, still talking. “Damn, Bambi. You hit your head pretty good.” The blond looked different now, the claws, talons and weird eyes were gone. He looked perfectly human, exactly like the Billy from his memories.

As if sensing his eyes, Billy's sky blue gaze lifted to meet his. “Are you okay, Steve?” The teen in question just blinked uncomprehendingly at the other male as if seeing him for the first time. The glint of metal pulled Steve out of his daze, his attention grabbed and held in a vice grip when his eyes settled on the golden amulet that dangled from Billy's free hand. “Billy...” Steve breathed softly, tearing his eyes away so he could look at the figure kneeling before him. He reached out, cautiously touching the cool skin of Billy's wrist, feeling the thump of the younger teen's heart when pressing his fingers against his pulse. “It's you. It's really you.”

He stared in puzzled astonishment as Billy shuffled closer, the blonde's brows furrowed in confusion. “Yeah. Yeah, Bambi, that's what I was trying to tell you before you went all Babe Ruth on me.” Suddenly remembering the sound of metal tearing flesh, Steve released his grip on the other male like it had burned him, and dropped his wide eyes to Billy's unmarred chest. “But...but I hit you. I know I hit you. How are you okay?” Steve felt his breathing begin to pick up the longer he stared at the inky black that was smeared across Billy's golden skin.

“Nope. No. We are *not* doing this again.” Billy hissed, hands frantic as they moved over Steve's frozen form. “Come on. Come on, Bambi. It's just me, *it's just me*.” He carefully framed Steve's face with both of his cold hands, bringing their foreheads together. Each of Billy's warm breaths fanned against his face, sweet like candy and somehow

soothing. Steve was surprised when the panic released his lungs, his breathing slowing to match Billy's calm puffs of air. The blond leaned back, but didn't go too far, staying practically nose to nose with the other. This close, Steve could count each individual freckle sprinkled across Billy's cheekbones and the bridge of his nose.

Suddenly feeling uncomfortable, Steve cleared his throat and carefully pushed Billy out of his personal space. "What uh- what happened?" When Steve had a panic attack, the details of what exactly triggered him and what had transpired during were kind of a blur. So he was left wondering why the back of his head was throbbing angrily and why he could taste blood. Billy stared quietly for a moment, slowly giving him a once over, before answering.

"You hit me with the bat and my necklace broke. And when you looked at me, you froze up. Next thing I know you're unresponsive." Steve sighed, ashamed of himself. Billy was the *last* person that he wanted to see him like that, weak and pathetic. "You kind of collapsed and backed up when I tried to approach you. Then you began slamming your head against the cabinets behind you. I'm guessing that when you hit your head, you must've bit your tongue." Steve's eyebrows shot up in disbelief, that was odd behavior. Robin had never said anything about self-harm during any other episodes, so this was a first.

"And no matter what I said, you wouldn't listen. You just kept repeating 'no' under your breath while hyperventilating and staring off blankly into the middle distance." Billy sounded kind of odd as he spoke, almost as if he were actually rattled by the incident. "It was like you couldn't *see* me. It was terrifying." Steve almost broke his neck with how fast he jerked his head up to look at Billy -*Billy Hargrove*- who had just admitted that he was scared and worried about *Steve*. The whole situation was insane and had Steve feeling like the rug had been pulled out from underneath him, leaving him trying and failing to regain his balance.

"It was a panic attack." He heard himself explaining without his say-so. "I have them sometimes when I'm reminded of shitty situations I've been in." He didn't know why, but Steve felt the irrational urge to comfort *Billy*, who was still staring at him like he might shatter if the blond moved away. Billy slowly rose before holding out his free



hand, palm up, in an offering. Steve took Billy's extended hand, gratefully letting the other male to help him up to his feet.

"How about we set you up with some pain meds? Have any Advil or Tylenol?" Billy scratched at his chin in thought and Steve stifled the need to smile at the adorable expression on the blonde's face. This was nothing like the Billy that he was used to, but he couldn't allow himself to let his guard down just because the blond expressed a bit of kindness. Billy had shown himself capable of being nice if it benefitted him somehow. Steve had to remember that the blond was still a ticking time bomb and any misstep could set him off.

"We have some in the bathroom, but I can't have any kind of pain reliever because of the meds I'm on." Billy halted all movement and side-glanced at the brunette, piercing eyes drilling into Steve's head as if he were trying to pull the unsaid information from the brunette's brain. "How about some alcohol then?" Billy moved back toward the fridge and Steve stopped him with a hand on his shoulder, the blond going stock still for a second time underneath his hand. Frustration overtook Billy's face, making it do some unattractive things as the blond attempted to get a lid on his emotions.

"Let me guess, can't have that either?" Steve nodded and released his hold on Billy so that the younger male could pace freely. "What do you do if you get hurt or have a headache?" The blond sounded furious, as if Steve's lack of options personally offended him somehow. Steve just shrugged, not really sure what to say and not wanting to push the blond further into a rage. He left Billy in the kitchen -the blond muttering to himself- in order to grab a large black garbage bag to start cleaning the kitchen. Steve desperately wished that he could take his medication. He felt overwhelmed, anxious and guilty; viciously cursing the fact that he couldn't fuck up his schedule by taking any before eight am.

Billy joined him a few minutes later, wordlessly grabbing one for himself. Steve abandoned the blonde to pick up the various food-stuffs scattered around, Steve went to investigate his magnet problem. He picked up the blue rose that Robin adored and tried to put it back on the fridge door. But the minute that he let go, it fell. He glared down at the magnet before squatting to pick it up and try again, only to get the same result. He attempted the same with every

single one of his magnets with the same thing happening every time he let go.

They had demagnetized, all of their stupid magnets did. The last time something like this happened, a rogue piece of the Mind Flayer had awoken and possessed Billy, leading to the blonde's tragic death. He glanced at the blond, who was considering a half-eaten slice of pizza before shrugging and tossing it into the trash bag. Steve couldn't help but wonder if Billy's sudden appearance had something to do with the magnet's odd state.

It took the two of them around an hour to finish cleaning up the mess in the kitchen, Steve allowing himself to be distracted by the monotonous task. He didn't want to look into Billy's mysterious resurrection, much less how the blond had even found him or got into the apartment with all the windows and doors locked. Billy moved into the living room and Steve followed. The blond made a move as if to flop down onto the couch and Steve's hand snapped out in order to grab his wrist and tug him away from the furniture with a disapproving frown.

The kids liked to call it his '*Disappointed Mom*' face. Billy gave him a questioning look and Steve explained himself. "You are covered in *unidentified shit* and, therefore, not allowed on any of the furniture until you shower." Billy gave Steve his trademark flirtatious grin, saddling up next to him and shamelessly pressing into Steve's personal space. "If you wanted me to get naked, you could've just asked." That attitude was more like the Billy he remembered, and the familiar behavior putting Steve at ease for some reason.

"Dude, get off me. We've just established that you're covered in yuck." Steve complained, shoving at the suddenly clingy male. "Go get in the shower. Towels are in the cupboard to the right of the bathroom, you animal." Steve gave him one last push to send the blonde on his way, waiting until the younger man was out of view before going back into the kitchen for something to eat. It was now nearing five in the morning and his stomach was complaining about the lack of food. He was about to open the cabinet when he noticed the black spots on the door and counter. Moving toward the light, Steve flicked the switch, illuminating the room and revealing the horror that was once hidden by the dark of the room.

There was a thick, ink-like substance all over the kitchen floor and Steve's own blood coating parts of the hardwood and lower cabinets. He probably stood frozen in shock for several minutes, just taking in the utter mess of the room, wondering what the black liquid was and where it came from. He recalls how black welled up in the wounds when the bat hit Billy, coating the nails in dark ink. Ripping the bat out must have flung the blood into all sorts of directions, which explained the drops of obsidian shining innocently at him from various surfaces.

Steve considered all the clues that alluded to the fact that Billy was not *exactly human*. The odd slime on the floor and coating his skin, the horrifying limbs and eyes, the odd gray coloring of his skin, the fact that he was cold to the touch like a corpse and the black blood. Something was going on here and it had something to do with that dreaded dimension. He needed help and he knew exactly who to call. Grabbing the landline, he listened closely to make sure that the shower was still running loudly before dialing.

"Robin, you need to get home, like right now. Billy Hargrove is in our apartment...and I think he came from the Upside Down."

## 2. Chapter 2

Steve winced when he heard the telltale thud of something colliding with the front door, followed by the frantic jingle of keys before the lock was flipped and the wooden obstruction was thrown open by a disheveled Robin. Her mouth opened, but Steve hastily raised a finger to his lips to signal that his roommate should keep her voice down. Robin's gaze narrowed and she leveled him with a *look*, which would've been much more effective if her eyes hadn't betrayed her fear.

Steve could certainly relate.

He was still processing all that had happened since he'd crawled out of bed, and the implications of Hargrove being alive were just now occurring to him. The Billy he saw before his panic attack hadn't been human, at least...not completely. He hadn't hallucinated the blonde's altered appearance, he knows that much. Not to mention the fact that the slimy footprints that he'd snapped photos of before mopping up made it clear that there'd been a *rift* to the *Upside Down* in their living room at one point during the night.

Steve had gone cold with the knowledge that there had been a gateway to the teen's own personal hell just one door away from him while he *slept*, he was just lucky that it was *Billy* who came through and not...something else. The thing that Steve was stumped on was the fact that there was a distinct lack of a rift when he left his room and El was the only person he knew that could close gateways between the two dimensions. Steve knew that the rifts didn't just mend themselves, so that just begged the question of whether it was possible that *Billy* was capable of sealing the tears just like El.

"Steve, where is it? Don't tell me you left that *thing* to its own devices!" Robin hissed, pulling Steve from his morbid speculations. "I don't know what it told you, but it is *not* Hargrove. Hargrove is *dead*." Steve grimaced, it's not like he wasn't *there*. He watched, frozen, as Billy stood up to the monster. Watched as Billy was impaled, watched as he dropped, watched as Max cried over her dying brother. Watched him choke out his last words, words Steve had been too far away to hear. Watched the life leave Billy's

impossibly blue eyes, a puddle of black steadily growing underneath him.

He wouldn't have wished that grisly death on *anyone*, even an asshole like Billy Hargrove.

They hadn't gotten along from the moment Billy arrived in the small town of Hawkins, which was why Steve was taken off-guard by the sharp throb in his chest when he looked down at Billy's cooling corpse. His eyes had stung with tears, a lump lodging itself into his throat, stealing his voice. He felt like he was a little kid again, like he had been transported back into the body of that lonely boy who was abandoned by his dismissive parents, who was terribly frightened of the silence he found himself surrounded by.

"Steve! Calm down, you're going to trigger a panic attack." The brunette blinked, Robin's worried face swimming into vivid clarity. "There you are, now breathe with me." She took an exaggerated breath in and Steve made a valiant attempt to copy her, his inhale was shaky and his lungs forced the breath back out almost immediately. But Robin didn't seem to mind, merely breathing in again to prompt Steve to do the same. His brows furrowed when he realized that he was seated on the floor, practically curled into a ball.

His face heated up in embarrassment, but Robin just continued to map mindless patterns onto his heaving back with her finger. "Thanks." Steve mumbled, grateful for Robin's patience with him. He knew he was a wreck. Life had shattered him, leaving the brunette to try and fit the jagged edges of himself back together into something that resembled functional. "No need to thank me Steve, it's what friends are for." Robin's tone left no room for argument and Steve had long since given up on trying to talk her out of rooming with him.

"I took a cold shower so there's plenty of hot water for you if you want to- Harrington? Are you okay?" Steve's head whirled towards Billy, who had paused in the mouth of the hallway, the darkness there partially hiding him from view. He was clad in sweatpants -one of Steve's favorite pairs- which displayed the plethora of pale scarring from familiar wounds that were located on the blonde's damp sides

and chest. "Who's this? Why are you hunched like that? Did she do something?" The blonde's voice had dropped into something more... *unhinged* by the third question. Billy's glacial eyes slid away from Steve to fasten onto Robin, a predator sizing up their prey. His gaze was bright with the promise of violence, it was an unsettling expression that the brunette was well-acquainted with.

Steve glanced at Robin to gauge how she was handling the pressure of that deranged stare, which was why he caught the way her own gaze flicked over to the bat. Steve had propped it up against the arm of the couch, not wanting it to be far away just in case another rift opened. She tensed in a telling way and Steve's eyes widened when he realized what she intended to do, which meant that Billy probably noticed as well. "Robin no- wait!" He reached out to grab her, but she was already off the ground and making a mad dash for the melee weapon.

Billy tore after her with a wide, feral grin that sent chills down Steve's spine. The brunette scrambled upright as Billy collided with Robin, her extended hand missing the handle of the bat by a few measly inches before they both went down with an audible thud. Robin wheezed when Billy's full bodyweight crushed her, struggling weakly when the blond shifted until he was straddling her back to keep her down. "Don't worry Bambi, she's not going anywhere." Billy's gaze was pinned to Robin's neck, his lips peeling back in the parody of a smile before his tongue ran over his teeth.

"Hold on, this is just a big misunderstanding. Please get off her." Steve grabbed Billy's bicep, gently tugging to coax the puzzled blond to his feet. "Harrington, what-" Billy cut himself off with a grunt when Robin unexpectedly kicked out, his left knee buckling with a sickening pop that had Steve's insides lurching. Billy dropped down onto his good knee with enough force to make the brunette cringe, the blonde's loud cursing making it clear that it had felt just as painful as it'd looked. Steve didn't even realize that Robin had moved until Billy grabbed his wrist in a borderline painful grip, looking over the brunette's shoulder with panicked blue eyes.

"Fuck! Steve, get behind me! She's got your bat-"

"Steve, get away from it! I'm putting this thing down-"

The brunette sucked in a surprised breath when he was dragged away from Billy by the back of his shirt, only to abruptly jerk to a harsh stop that made his shoulder scream in protest when the arm that the blond held hostage was pulled taut. Steve flinched at the hot stab of pain that zipped down to the tips of his fingers, gritting his teeth against the uncomfortable pull. The next moment though, the blond was releasing his iron grip on Steve's wrist. The brunette stumbled back with the strength of Robin's insistent pulling, his roommate putting distance between Steve and Billy, the latter having relocated both hands to his wounded knee.

There was a sharp crack when the blond jerked the injured limb to the side, then Billy was gingerly climbing to his feet, scowling at his left leg when he put weight onto it. Robin's fingers fell away from Steve's shirt in favor of readying the bat for a full assault, the blonde's gaze fixing itself onto the brandished weapon before he froze. Billy's eyes repeatedly jumped from the spiked end of the bat to Steve, his features downright *malicious* as he held his hands up in a placating gesture.

"Okay...let's just leave Harrington out of this, yeah?" Billy would've appeared casual or even charming to almost anyone else, but Steve had seen the brutality that lurked behind the blonde's nonchalant demeanor too many times to be fooled himself. There was fury burning like an uncontrollable inferno in his eyes, his body a ridged line. Steve was baffled by how fast the blond had backed off until he considered where each of them stood in relation to one another. The brunette was positioned a step in front of his roommate, and she had moved to the right in order to give herself room to swing.

The teen's brows shot up to his hairline when he realized that, in Billy's eyes, it probably looked like Robin was preparing to hit *Steve*. Which meant that there was an overwhelming possibility that the blonde wasn't going at her right now because he believed that Robin was using the brunette as *leverage*, which didn't make sense because the Billy he remembered definitely wouldn't have batted an eye. "What? You're the one who dragged him into this by wearing that fucking face!" Robin spat, taking a menacing step forward. Steve winced at his friend's declaration, because to Billy it would definitely sound like a threat.

“Just wait till I get my hands on you...” The blond purred, his arms lowering back to his sides, hands curling into tight fists. Unfortunately, Steve couldn't see a peaceful end to this situation, each scenario he thought up resulted in an outcome that was worse than the first. He didn't know what to do, he didn't know how to keep Robin and Billy from killing the other. His ribcage tightened, threatening to compromise his ability to breathe. Steve's next exhale left his lungs in the form of a desperate gasp, white noise filling up his ears.

“Easy Bambi, it's alright. I won't let her hurt you.” Billy's voice softened into something that should've been soothing, but the blonde's words only made it that much harder to inhale. Someone was going to die, someone was going to be reduced to a cooling corpse in his living room because he couldn't manage to get his traitorous body under control and explain the situation to them. “What the hell? I'm not going to- shit, Steve, you're not looking so good.” Robin took her eyes off of Billy to instead take inventory of the wheezing brunette, her grip on the bat loosening a fraction as she debated on how to proceed.

Steve chanced a brief look at Billy just in time to see the blond shift his weight in a telling manner, Robin redirecting her attention away from Billy for that split second was all the blonde needed in order to gain the upper hand. Billy moved with all the grace of a deadly predator, rapidly closing the distance between them with speed that was almost *inhuman*. Thankfully, Robin had been honing her reflexes since she found out about the Upside Down and the nightmarish creatures that dwelled within the twisted dimension. So Steve wasn't exactly surprised when Robin managed to shove the brunette out of the line of fire before swinging the bat with a ferocity that would make professional baseball players green with envy.

The blonde's grin was all teeth as he ducked at the last possible moment to avoid the lethal hit, Robin backpedalling in order to maintain the open space between the two blood-thirsty individuals. They circled each other as Steve debated what he could possibly do to avoid the death of either of the teenagers and, the first thing that popped into his mind was risky, but it had a high probability of stopping them both in their tracks. So when Robin planted a rough



kick to Billy's chest to knock him off-balance and wound up for another swing, Steve scrambled up from the floor and threw himself between the two.

Robin's eyes blew wide, a horrified gasp of 'Steve' bursting from her lips. The brunette was frozen, watching as his trusty bat came hurtling toward his head. There was no doubt in his mind that he was about to die, and at the hands of his best friend no less. He hoped that she knew that he wasn't mad at her, that he forgave her without hesitation or lingering spite. He couldn't close his eyes, couldn't pry his gaze away from the horrified look on Robin's face. The approaching nails that seemed to excitedly reach out for his soft flesh were a mere blur in his peripheral vision. There was the rush of wind across his face as a tanned arm shot out, blocking Robin's pale, panicked features from his sight.

Steve's uncomprehending gaze followed the limb, eyes screeching to a halt on the charcoal-colored wrist. Apparently, Billy had somehow managed to get his right arm around Steve's head and, using a hand that was suddenly adored with deadly claws, caught the bat by the crooked nails. The unyielding metal spikes bit into dark flesh when they met the blonde's extended appendage, the momentum pushing Billy hand back towards Steve's wide-eyed expression. The scrape of the nail's sharpened tips raked across the brunette's cheek, red lines raising in their wake.

Steve tensed when the broad chest that was pressed flush against his back vibrated, a low sound working its way out from between the blonde's gritted teeth. The brunette realized with a start that Billy was *growling*, the menacing rumble was unlike anything Steve had ever heard before. It was high and raspy, like a hiss, but with a deeper echo that had the hair on the brunette's arms standing on end. Sure, he'd jokingly called Billy an animal earlier, but if how the blonde reacted to Robin's hostility was any indication...Billy had some serious issues in the upstairs department.

Billy's grip on the bat tightened and Robin relinquished the weapon to the blonde immediately, even going as far as backing away a few shaky steps. Steve watched her retreat, a lump getting stuck in his throat when her trembling hands lifted to cover her face with a shuddering '*fuck*' muttered into her palms. Steve was careful to keep

himself between Billy and Robin as the blonde used his free hand to pry the bat away from his palm, the nails coming free from the torn flesh with a wet squelch that had Steve's insides churning uneasily.

The blonde's lip curled into a sneer as he scrutinized the several holes that now littered his hand, like their mere existence offended him. The mutilated limb was leaking the same dark sludge as before, the ink-like blood pooling in his palm before running over the edge of his hand, the thick streams of the dark liquid spilling out onto the floor. Billy kept a hold of the weapon with his undamaged hand, gripping just under the plethora of chaotically placed nails.

***"I'm sick and tired of this fucking bat."*** Billy's voice was...wrong. It sent an icy chill down Steve's spine, the cold settling heavy in his stomach and making the organ churn uneasily. Billy talking was somehow *so much* worse than the growling he'd heard from the blonde earlier. Within one breath and the next, the gray claw around the bat flexed, the wood splintering under the force of compression put behind the violent action. Both Steve and Robin flinched at the loud crack, the latter even taking a step towards the pair in front of her in a useless attempt to protect Steve.

***"Fuck off, bitch."*** Steve shuddered as the blonde's raspy voice sounded from right next to his ear, Billy's breath caressing his skin with each heaving breath. The entirety of his situation was giving the brunette mixed signals. The press of Billy's compact body at his back and his breath on his neck was surprisingly intimate, but Steve's animal brain kept screaming at him to run, insisting that the blonde was dangerous. So it left Steve caught in this awkward limbo between utter terror and uncontrollable lust.

***"You take another step and I'm gonna gut you and skip-rope with your intestines."*** A grey hand came forward and placed itself possessively across Steve's stomach, pulling him with Billy as the blonde took a step back and away from Robin. The female teen looked visibly confused for a moment before Billy's words registered and some lightbulb went off in her head. The whole process looked painful and Steve wasn't really following.

"Wait, so you're *not* trying to hurt Steve?" Robin asked, disbelief dripping from each syllable, which made Billy bristle at his back.

They stood in mutual silence for a few seconds before the blonde teen broke it with a snarl. "What the fuck is that supposed to mean!? You're the one that barged in here acting all crazy and shit!" At the smooth sound of the teens voice, Steve glanced down at the hand across his waist and, sure enough, it was back to its normal tan color. *Thank god.* At least the confusion stopped Billy's murderous rage in its tracks.

*"Me!? You're the dangerous creature from another fucking dimension-"*

*"Ha! That's fucking rich coming from the one who went at me with a bat and used Steve-"*

"Okay, stop!" Steve's voice rang out into the apartment and the squabbling teens went silent. "Robin, *he's* not gonna hurt me. Billy, *she's* not trying to hurt me. No one is maiming anyone! Both of you can chill the fuck out now!" Steve was panting by the end of his heated rant and both teens were staring at him with wide eyes. Then Billy was shaking, his surprisingly high-pitched laughter filling the room and breaking the tense silence that had descended upon them. It was genuine and nothing like the unhinged cackle that he'd heard at the Byer's house.

It was actually quite...nice.

"Are we done here?" The good natured laughter took the wind out of Steve's sails and the anger just seeped away, so the question came out more adoringly exasperated than he'd meant it to. The blonde calmed down before finally letting go of Steve and stepping away to give the brunette some breathing room. He came forward to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the taller boy, meeting Steve's questioning gaze with a flirtatious smirk. "Damn Bambi, you've got one hell of a mean streak." He snickered quietly before addressing Robin.

"Truce?" He held out a hand, but Robin didn't reach for it. She merely leveled the offered appendage with a distrusting glare, opting to instead turn to Steve for advice on how to proceed. The brunette shrugged and nodded towards Billy's outstretched hand, Robin rolling her eyes before taking the blonde's attempt at an olive branch. She startled as the grip on her limb was used to jerk her closer. "I'm not

sorry for my actions and I *will* do it again if you pull something. But keep in mind that next time, Steve won't be able to stop me." She ripped her arm from his lax grasp, taking Steve by the wrist and dragging him into the kitchen for some privacy.

"What are we gonna do about him? He's a wild card that we don't need right now." Robin hisses, glancing back at a smiling Billy from where they'd left him in the living room. Steve shakes his head in disagreement, the action pulling her attention back to him. "It's not *him* that's the problem, Robin. It's the implications of him being here and *alive*. That's the problem." They both glanced over at the blonde, who'd apparently gotten bored with their secrecy, and planted himself onto the couch with some snacks.

"The Upside Down." She whispers, like if she spoke too loudly then one of the Demogorgon's would hear her and rip open a portal to kill them right there. Steve nodded in agreement, fearing that if he tried speaking, that his voice would crack and give away his horror. He thought he'd gotten rid of that terrible dimension and all of it's fucked up monsters, but it always managed to slither its way back into his life, affecting him *and* the kids.

He was already on a cocktail of intense medications because of the trauma and now it's come back for more.

"Steve, if this is the Upside Down, that means they're in danger too. You know what we have to do." Robin stared imploringly at the reluctant brunette until he caved. Either they warned the kids or the rugrats found out the hard way and someone got hurt. "You're right. We need to call El and Max."

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

I feel like all I do is apologize for posting late, and I'm sorry for that. Lol. But on a more serious note, I've suddenly become incredibly busy because I'm moving at the end of this month and there's a lot that needs to happen before then. So updates will be slow, so wish me luck! Oh! And I recently posted the first chapter of another fic if anyone is interested? It's not Harringrove, but some of you might find it worth

a read. It's a rare-pair fic that takes place in The Walking Dead universe, the pairing is Dean Winchester/Daryl Dixon. If you really like my writing, give this pairing a chance? You never know, you might fall in love with it like I did. Feel free to leave a review! Stay weird my lovelies!

### 3. Chapter 3

There was the anticipated rapid knocking at the apartment door, the sound prompting Steve to emotionally steel himself before opening the wooden barrier. He just barely managed to catch Max by the forearm when she tried to squeeze past him, leading her back out into the hallway. He shut the door behind him, turning to the visibly distraught ginger-haired girl. "Hey Max, hold up a minute." He kept a firm grip on her until Max relented and moved away from the door.

She turned her cutting blue eyes to the young adult, impatiently waiting for Steve to explain himself. He was keeping her from reuniting with her previously-believed-to-be-dead brother after all. "Here's the thing. He was rather hostile with Robin, so we're not sure how he'd react to you leaping at him." Max made a face and opened her mouth to give the brunette a piece of her mind, but Steve just held up a hand and she immediately deflated.

"I know this is hard and confusing and scary, but you've *gotta* trust me. Don't approach him unless *he* initiates contact. I don't want you getting hurt." The ginger considered his terms before agreeing with a small nod, her eyes hard and determined. Steve let a small smile spread across his face at the familiar look, he was relieved that she was taking this so well. He ruffled her cropped hair fondly before she swatted him off, scowling as she ran her fingers through the short strands to fix the disturbed locks.

He heard her shaky exhale as he placed his hand on the knob, turning it and letting the door swing inward. He stepped in first, catching Billy's attention from where he lounged on the couch, before side-stepping and revealing a wide-eyed Max. Billy froze, the flirtatious smile on his face falling into shock upon seeing his step-sister. The ginger tried to stay strong, but it was her *brother*. Billy was sitting in Steve's living room, unapologetically *alive*. A dam burst in her chest, breaking through her steadfast defenses, and tears welled up in her eyes as her breath caught.

Even through the blurriness of her vision, she could see the blonde stand and take a hesitant step towards her. She was hit by the sudden and overwhelming urge to feel his heartbeat beneath her ear, to hear

the sweet sound that had once gone still and silent. She could do this, she wouldn't alienate him this time. She'd do better, so if the shitty universe could just give her this *one thing*. "Billy." She choked on the familiar name, her voice cracking halfway through and then he was *moving*. He was in front of her between one blink and the next, lurching forward to envelop the sniffing girl in his arms.

His skin was oddly cold, but Max couldn't find it in herself to care at the moment. Not when he was murmuring soothing nonsense into her short hair, squeezing her tightly. "Hey, kiddo. It's alright." He doesn't let go even as the tears turn into hiccupping breaths. Then, when she does eventually pull away, he doesn't let her go far. His heart was beating rather quickly, but Max could feel hers doing the same and figured that because of the emotionally charged situation, it was to be expected. He looked down at the ginger-haired girl, staring intensely into her bright blue eyes, before saying something that made the entire room freeze in collective confusion.

"So I'm guessing we know each other?"

\* \* \*

"He doesn't remember me? That makes no sense!" Steve had to agree with Max, Billy wouldn't have consoled some random kid -now or then- it just wasn't in his nature to be kind, much less to complete strangers. He had to have known who Max was, subconsciously or otherwise. Steve saw it in how Billy's features softened when he saw her, the way he held her and heard it in the heartfelt words of comfort. Robin was too busy staring at an eating Billy to add to the conversation, so Steve softly nudged her to get her attention.

"Why don't we just ask *him* about it?" Robin suggested and, after sharing a loaded look, Steve and Max agreed with her simple plan. They turned to Billy in unison, the blonde pausing his demolition of Robin's Oreo stash when he noticed their collective gaze, eyes darting over the three of them. "What?" The question came out muffled, cookie crumbs falling out of his mouth as he spoke. Steve stifled a laugh at the disgusting display, the whole picture contrasted the immaculate stud that the brunette knew from highschool.

"You didn't seem to remember Max, so we were wondering why you

reacted to her distress like you did?" Robin had assigned Steve to do most of the communication with the blonde since Billy had a seemingly *endless* tolerance for the brunette. The blonde spared the half-empty cookie container one last, longing look before putting it onto the coffee table in front of him. Once the cookies were set aside, he put his elbows on his knees and leaned forward to give them his undivided attention.

He sighed heavily and Steve could practically *see* the gears turning in his head, he was probably trying to find a way to put something so complicated into words. "My memories are less like concrete pictures and more bursts of feeling. The emotions I felt... *before*, connecting you to me whenever I see you. The more we interacted, the more intense the feelings that I associate with you." They all knew what Billy meant when he hesitated on the word *before*. Before dying, before turning into whatever he was now.

"That would explain you not recognizing Robin. You never actually *saw* her." Steve pointed out, but it still didn't explain why he'd been so kind to Steve. All of their interactions before the mall had been violent and hate-filled, at least that's how it had felt on his side. Robin seemed to have come to the same conclusion, because she was the one who voiced their collective confusion. "That still doesn't explain your behavior toward Steve." At Robin's comment, Max's angry gaze snapped to Billy's perplexed face.

"What do you mean!? Did he hurt you again!? What did you do!?" Each question was acknowledging one of the other three teens in the room. Thankfully, there were no weapons nearby, because the wild glint in her eyes told Steve that -in that moment- she would have used it on her brother. The brunette took note of Billy's sudden defensive posture as the ginger's volume, his gaze nervously darting from Max to Steve and back again. Did Billy think that Max was a threat? Regardless of the reason, he needed to avoid a repeat performance of the incident from earlier, the last thing he wanted was for the step-siblings to be at each other's throats like they were before Billy's untimely death.

"Calm down." Steve addressed the room at large before acknowledging the anxious ginger. "No Max, nothing happened. He's been perfectly civil." Steve stepped closer to the agitated Billy and



saw the blonde's tense posture relax slightly. "Well, as civil as Billy *can* be." Steve said with a weak smile -trying to lighten the mood- and got Robin to snort at his unsubtle effort. Max leveled the brunette with an unimpressed stare while Billy just gave him a stunned look. Steve rubbed the back of his neck self-consciously, stepping away from the blonde and toward the kitchen to finally take his medication. His anxiety was becoming worse and worse as more problems popped up.

He was pulling his two prescriptions from the cabinet when one of the small orange bottles was plucked out of his hand. He whipped around, coming face to face with Billy, who was reading the label with a cute scrunch between his eyebrows. Steve turned around and leaned back into the counter before quickly realizing that he had just cornered himself between the curious blonde and the counter at his back. He felt his face warm at how close the two of them were, Steve could *feel* the cool air pouring off of the shorter male. "What did she mean by *again*? Have I hurt you before? When I was... *flayed*?" Billy hesitated over the last word, his nose scrunching.

Steve's mind blanked at the question, there was *no way* that he was going to unload the shit-fest that was the night at the Byer's house onto the blonde when he was so mentally and emotionally vulnerable. Telling Billy about what he'd done would have disastrous consequences, that was an *undeniable fact*. Steve refused to do that to him, especially since he wouldn't actually remember *doing it*. But the blonde would *feel* it, he would feel every single emotion that had been surging through his own mind as he beat Steve into a bloody pulp. So no, he wasn't about to open *that* particular can of worms until Billy was more stable.

He was saved from having to awkwardly lie when someone began hysterically pounding at the apartment door. Steve groaned, rubbing a hand over his face when Robin opened the abused wooden obstruction and a familiar squeaky voice filled the room. "Steve! Steve, is it a code red!? If it's a code red you have to tell us!" Dustin tore through the living room like a whirlwind in his mad search for the older male, before practically throwing himself into the kitchen. He froze, eyes going wide as he realized just *who* was practically pressed up against the brunette.

“Wait, Dustin-” Steve tried to stop the panic before it could build, but was too late. “Holy shit! No one told me that he was *here!*” The kid screeched, brandishing his finger rather dramatically at the confused blonde. Max flew into the room when she heard Dusty begin yelling, looking to the world like a deranged ally cat ready for bloodshed. When nothing threatening immediately tried to eat her, she loosened up and took in the situation, raising a brow at how close the two older teens were.

Steve began spluttering as he shoved at Billy’s chest, face flushing an embarrassing shade of pink as he realized what their position probably insinuated. Billy undermined his struggling and made the whole thing even worse by placing a hand on his hip and gripping possessively, all the while never breaking eye contact with the two children in the entryway. “Hey Bambi, you know this loudmouth?” Billy asked, staring intently at the child, who was currently doing a great impression of a dying animal with the noises coming out of him.

“Yes Billy. *I* know him. *You* know him. *Max* knows him. *We all* know him.” He deadpanned, giving up on getting free and just accepting the fact that Billy was going to stay draped over him. “That’s Dustin. I think you saw each other briefly.” The blonde seemed to consider Steve’s words, searching his muddled brain for any hint of recognition and most likely coming up empty.

“Yeah, no. I got nothing.” Billy shrugged, not seeming to put off by the revelation. He just disregarded Dustin altogether, turning back to Steve and reaching for the second orange pill bottle in order to read that label as well. “Well, makes sense. The only time you saw him before you were flayed was...” Steve trailed off, not sure how to end the sentence. He could lie, but Dustin tended to be pretty thick and would most likely call him out on his bull. That was the last thing he needed at this point, but apparently the universe could care less about what Steve wanted.

“Duh. It was the Byers house. When you almost *beat* Steve to *death*.” Dustin narrowed his almond-shaped eyes at the blonde, before lecturing Steve. “Remember that Steve? Cause *I* sure do. The only reason you’re not dead is because of Max.” Even with his squeaky, prepubescent voice, Dustin somehow managed to come off as

wrathful. Steve was about to come to Billy's defense, when he took note of the nervous look that washed over Max's face. It was then that he registered that the hand on his hip had tightened, nails biting into his skin even through the thick material of his shirt. He hissed, eyes shooting up to stare warily at the blonde looming in front of him.

Billy's already freezing temperature dropped even further and Steve felt a tickle at the back of his neck as the little hairs there rose. "Billy..." He cautiously addressed the teen, trying to get his attention, though his dull gaze told Steve that the blonde was somewhere far away. Somewhere unpleasant if the hand on his waist was any indication. Max took a step forward and Steve stopped her progress with a hand, the ginger heeding his silent command and hesitantly backing off. "Billy? You okay?" The kitchen felt like an icebox at this point and Steve couldn't keep himself from shivering slightly.

"I-I couldn't stop. I was so *angry* ...and it felt so *good* to hit you." Steve watched as the blonde's free hand curled into a fist, tan bleeding away and tinting the skin a dark grey. Steve swallowed down his nerves, taking a shaky breath before reaching for the blonde's clenched hand. Billy's ashen skin was like ice, cool and smooth to the touch. Steve ignored the mild discomfort and gently pushed his fingers into the blonde's palm, forcing Billy's fingers to uncurl and fall away. With his tactic having been successful, Steve became more bold and laced their hands together, letting Billy leech the warmth from his skin.

"It's fine, I-" He was cut off when Billy ripped his hand from his soothing grasp, backing away a couple of steps while staring at Steve as if the brunette had just gutted him. "Fine? *FINE!*? It's not fine! Max was *gone* and he- then you just- *FUCK!*" Clearly frustrated with his inability to express himself, Billy violently swept a hand over the counter, knocking various appliances and knickknacks to the floor with a loud crash. Steve heard the conversation in the next room abruptly cut off, the apartment becoming deathly quiet in response to Billy's aggression.

Apparently, the memory of that night was overwhelming the blonde, causing him to vent his resentment the only way a damaged person knew how, by lashing out. Steve could see Robin keeping Mike,

Lucas, and Erica at bay while Nancy watched things play out with wide, frightened eyes. He understood why, but he couldn't help but hate the way they all treated Billy like a feral animal. The way they reacted to his distress, standing and staring as if the unstable teen were in a zoo. Though he wasn't much better, frozen against the counter where the blonde had left him.

He knew that Billy wouldn't react well to being coddled and decided to change tactics. "You're right." He said, not bothering to raise his voice, he knew that Billy would hear him. His quiet agreement gained the undivided scrutiny of everyone in the kitchen. The blonde teen halted his destruction, back heaving as he faced away from Steve, the metal of the toaster groaning where it was caged between grey claws. *Good, he had his attention.* "I was terrified. For me, for the kids." He paused and took a deep breath before continuing.

"I thought that I understood you. I mean, I've dealt with guys like you before, but I was *so wrong*. You were more damaged than I could've ever suspected. To the point where you would unleash all that hatred and insecurity onto someone who didn't deserve it." Billy had turned to face him now, arctic eyes blazing angrily the longer that Steve spoke, unearthing all of the blonde's dirty secrets. "I don't understand you and I'll never pretend that I do, but I do understand that it wasn't *me* you were hitting, was it?"

Billy was quiet and still for a long time, gaze fixed onto Steve with a focus that made the brunette nervous, so he did the only thing he could do... *talk*. "I don't understand you, but I get trauma. I understand that suffocating feeling of not being enough. Of being feared and hated. I've felt the weight of my parents expectations and know what it's like to fall short." He took a step closer to the blonde, the abused appliance in Billy's grasp falling to the floor with a clatter as he gazed at Steve with fearful eyes. He was scared of *Steve*, of what he would say next.

"I don't know you and you don't know me, but I can still acknowledge your pain. And you did hurt me that night, putting me and my kids in danger, but I've already come to terms with it. And I want you to know that *I forgive you*." The silence following the rant was insanely tense, the entire apartment collectively holding their breath. Steve could hear his heartbeat in his ears, he didn't know

how the teen would react, but didn't have to wonder for long.

It was like a dam broke.

Steve watched as the first tear slipped from Billy's bright eyes, the blonde teen abruptly busting into uncontrollable sobbing. He was barely able to draw a full breath before a new slew of crying was wracking his frame, his body jerking with the force of his sobs. The brunette hesitated for a few seconds, before approaching the hysterical blonde. Billy noticed his advance and cowered away, snarling a warning between bouts of tears. It was pathetic and Steve was finally shown the scared, lost child that was hidden away underneath several thick layers of bravado.

The brunette disregarded the threatening noise and cautiously moved closer. Billy couldn't seem to decide between continuing to wail out his grief or defend himself. "Hey." Steve called out softly, thankful that the others were being quiet enough that he didn't have to yell at the already skittish teen. The blonde sniffled, rubbing uselessly at his beautiful eyes before leveling his gaze with Steve's own. "I'm not gonna hurt you." Billy slowly came forward and Steve kept still, encouraging the blonde to do whatever he needed to do to calm down.

"Don't grab me." Was the blonde's only warning before Billy was leaning into Steve, shrinking in on himself until his forehead was pressed up against Steve's collarbone, tears dripping from his eyes and wetting the brunette's shirt. The elder teen obeyed the blonde's request and didn't move, leaving his arms limp at his sides, allowing Billy to take comfort from the heat radiating from his form. It took Steve awhile to realize that the blonde was repeating something under his breath as he leaned up against him. He could barely make out the words, but the ones he did recognize made his own eyes burn threateningly.

*"I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I didn't want to."*

Steve lifted a hand to cover his face as he unraveled at the seams, salty tears falling into Billy's golden mane. The blonde had stiffened when Steve initially shifted, but when no further movement happened, Billy had distrustfully lifted his head. He studied Steve's

hidden face and shaking shoulders and his mouth fell open in disbelief. The blonde stared at Steve, who was sobbing harshly, body shaking as he hid from the smaller teens' gaze. "Hey." Echoing how the brunette had handled him earlier, Billy softly called for Steve's attention, pulling the brunette's hands from his face. "It's okay."

"No it's not." Steve's voice wobbled and Billy gave him a mean smile before agreeing with a low, "No. It's not."

## 4. Chapter 4

### Notes for the Chapter:

Uh...hey guys? I finally finished this chapter, things have been pretty stressful lately with this whole moving thing. So updates are going to be slow, but hang in there, yeah? And, as always, stay weird my lovelies!

Billy bounced back from his mental breakdown faster than Steve had ever believed possible, the blonde's resilience was impressive to say the least. Billy's eyes were still pink, but dry as he gave his best effort to eat Steve and Robin out of house and home like he was in some kind of competition. The brunette brutally shoved down the impulse to hit the already traumatized blonde for shoving *literally anything edible* that they had in their kitchen into his mouth. Thankfully though, they were only a day away from having to go grocery shopping again regardless.

One thing about the younger teen's behavior still worried Steve though. The blonde had yet to stop hovering around him. Billy was pressed up against Steve's back as the brunette *finally* took his medication, he was constantly one step behind Steve when he moved about and, anytime the brunette stopped or sat down, Billy made it his mission in life to be as close as possible. If Steve didn't know any better, he would say that Billy was being... *clingy*.

The blonde's obvious need to be close to Steve didn't stop Max from separating the two of them in order to drag her brother towards the newcomers in the apartment. She brought him before Lucas first, asking the blonde what he felt. The kid was shifting nervously as Billy scrutinized him for a moment, then the older boy turned back to Max with a shrug. "It's kinda vague, but there's something there." Max frowned, but before she could push further, Steve pulled her away and back to where the Party had gathered. When she recounted Billy's words to the huddled kids, there was an immediate uproar of accusations being thrown around.

"He's a racist asshole, remember? Of course he would have '*feelings*'

about Lucas!" Dustin squawked and Lucas gave him a flat look. Max thought about it for a minute, considering his hypothesis before speaking. "Billy did come off that way when I talked about him. And he *did* attack Lucas at the Byers house." There was a murmured agreement throughout the group as they all came to the same conclusion. Steve clicked his tongue, shaking his head before interrupting the squabbling kids to say his own piece. With all the information he now had on the teen and his background, he was sure that he knew the true reason for his offensive words and actions.

"His *father* was racist. The emotions Billy's most likely referring to, was the fact that Lucas was *clearly* interested in Max at the time. He's an asshole but still cared in his own twisted way. Who wouldn't be protective over their sibling's emotional well-being?" Lucas petulantly slapped at Erica's hand when it shot up in response to Steve's rhetorical question. Max snorted at her antics and gave the sassy girl a high five, showing her support. The two were a particularly brutal tag team when it came to reaming Lucas. The girls had formed a bond when Max had been dating Lucas and stayed friends even after the couple's mutual breakup.

After, the Party brought Billy straight to Nancy -since the blonde had never even *seen* Erica- for careful scrutiny. He stared at her for a few seconds, face briefly screwing up in confusion, before darkening into a look of disgust. He backed away from the shocked female until he bumped into Steve, effectively halting his retreat. "I don't like her." The blonde told him in a low voice, eyes never leaving a baffled Nancy. Steve's brows furrowed together, unsure as to what reason Billy could possibly have to hate *Nancy* of all people. He hadn't ever interacted with her before *or* while flayed. The only time they ever saw one another was when she was with Steve.

"Why?" The brunette asked the twitchy teen, absentmindedly rubbing Billy's thick forearms in an unconscious effort to calm him. The blonde sniffed, straightening his posture to his full height before turning his head, his nose bumping against Steve's cheek. "I just don't." Steve could tell from the stilted response and Billy's body language that he was lying. Or, at the very least, omitting the truth. He knew something, he just didn't want to say it.

And Steve wasn't about to force him to, so he took mercy on the guy



and changed the subject. “Alright. Then I guess that you just have to try and override those feelings by getting to know her now?” Steve was guessing at how these things worked, he didn’t exactly have a book on what to do if your undead mutated bully didn’t like your ex. He was acting on instinct here.

Mike happened to be the next unfortunate victim of Max and Billy, the ginger placing the blonde before the glaring dark-haired boy. Steve didn’t even need to see Billy’s face to know that their reunion was going to be awful. Almost every time Mike and Billy had interacted, it had been violent. Even after Billy had been flayed, the blonde teen had been relentlessly targeting El. And, with how enamored Mike was with the powerful girl, he’d gotten in the way several times, even going as far as to enlist the help of the other Party members. The whole thing was a dead giveaway for how they’d feel about one another.

Even now, Mike was scowling at Billy as the older teen visibly processed the negative emotions associated with the pale boy. The blonde narrowed his own eyes at the rebellious kid, before turning to Steve and the others. “Definitely irritation. *Lots* of irritation.” Billy frowned at a fuming Mike and Steve sighed, knowing that the boy was about to blow a gasket. “Irritation? *Irritation!*? How about utter *loathing* you freak!? You terrorized Max and the rest of us, attacking Steve and Lucas *before* you were even flayed! And then *while* possessed, you go kill people and try to feed El to the Mind Flayer! I *hate* you!”

The whole room stood quietly in shocked silence at Mike’s outburst, before Max broke it by screaming back at the seething kid. “He didn’t have control over what he was doing while flayed! You heard him in the sauna! We all did!” Steve saw Billy shift out of his peripheral vision and wondered whether or not he remembered what it was that they were referring to. Steve himself had never heard of this sauna fiasco, which was odd considering that he was under the impression that Max had caught him up. The angry girl in question crossed her arms over her chest and glowered at Mike, who gave it back just as good.

“Oh yeah? And how do we know that it wasn’t just an act to appeal to your *girly feelings* and get you to let him out!?” Max looked

murderous and Robin cleared her throat in an effort to avoid the impending disaster. “What sauna? Like *the pool* sauna?” Steve asked. It would make sense considering that it was where Billy worked, even while flayed, to keep up appearances. Lucas nervously turned to Robin and Steve, and even Dustin looked a bit sheepish. Max and Mike ignored their obvious concerned curiosity and continued arguing with one another, their raised voices forcing the others to raise their own in order to be heard.

“Yeah, we just figured that Dustin would have told you since we told you-”

“Hey, Lucas! Don’t throw me under the bus! Any one of you could’ve said something-”

“Hold on! Tell me what?” Steve was yelling by now, since the volume in the apartment kept increasing as people tried to talk over one another. “We lured Billy into the sauna at the pool after his shift to confirm whether or not he was flayed.” Lucas informed them in one breath and Steve frowned, thinking it over. In order to get a reaction, it would’ve had to have been seriously hot, enough to kill a person if they weren’t careful. His warm brown eyes widened with the implications of Lucas’ statement, horror welling up in his throat.

“You *what!*?” The kids and Robin flinched away from him and the room quieted down at the sound of his voice cutting through the chaos. “Will almost didn’t survive his own exorcism and he was in a *controlled environment* with an *adult* present.” Steve placed his hands on his hips as he stepped in front of Billy, shielding the struggling teen from view. “What were you *thinking!*? If he *had* been flayed, you just made it so he didn’t have to play nice anymore. And if he *wasn’t* flayed, you already knew that Billy is no stranger to violence. He could’ve hurt you! You could’ve *killed* him!”

“But El-” Mike spoke up and Steve shut him down with a scathing look. “As far as I’m concerned El is still just a *kid*. Powers or not, her presence does not condone stupidity!” He snapped and Mike’s shoulders crawled up to his ears, shrinking away from Steve’s scathing fury. “That was irresponsible and dangerous! Not only were you putting everyone there at risk, you were also willing to endanger Billy on a fucking whim. He can be a piece of shit, but he’s still a

*person!"*

The room just stayed silent and took the verbal abuse that Steve was dishing out, all finding different scenarios as to where they had wronged the blonde. Whether they didn't try hard enough to help him or just didn't think that they had to, the brunette's rant was affecting everyone in the room, even himself. Steve startled when a hand lightly brushed his side, Billy still behind him and out of sight. The brunette sighed and rubbed at his face. Not much they can do about the past now, they just had to live with the decisions that had been made and try to do better this time. They were lucky that they even got a second chance, most people didn't.

Once it was clear that Steve was done verbally tearing into them, most of the teens present chose to vacate the living room to wander or sit and think. Robin opted to stay with Billy and Steve, flopping down onto the couch on the brunette's free side when he heavily sat down. All interest had been lost with Billy and his vague memories at Steve's outburst. Unfortunately, the whole clusterfuck of an experiment took only about an hour, leaving them with another five to kill until El, Will, Jonathan and Joyce arrived. Which meant that he had to cheer up *and* entertain his shaken friends until the calvary showed up.

Billy complained about being hungry, so it was decided that Steve would keep the calorie fiend at bay while Robin made pancakes for everyone. *God knew* that they had enough boxes of pancake mix to feed a small army. When either of them went to the store, they usually forgot that they already had pancake mix; so upon seeing the colorful packaging, they got excited and bought another one. It happened every single time without fail, so the two of them had built up quite the collection. Hopefully it would be enough to get Billy to *stop fucking eating*.

The next hour was spent feeding the nine Upside Down experts, Steve and Robin taking turns cooking pancakes so the other could eat. Flapjack after flapjack was loaded onto plates until no one could move...with the exception of Billy, who was still inhaling pancakes like they were oxygen and he was drowning. The blonde had already gone through one and a half bottles of syrup, a jar of raspberry jam and about three boxes of pancake mix just by himself. Steve was

stuck in the kitchen, cooking for Billy, even as the others broke off to go and watch a movie. The pancakes were a success and put everyone in a better mood.

When Steve looked up into the dining room, he was surprised to see Nancy awkwardly standing across from Billy, who had actually stopped eating to talk to her. "I have no idea why you don't like me, but I was hoping to maybe change that?" She began and Steve couldn't help but smile softly at her back. She could be a bit naïve at times, but she was a sweetheart through and through. It was one of the reasons he fell in love with her in the first place. He caught Billy staring at him from around her form with an unreadable look on his face and Steve gave him a small wave, hoping to ease the blonde's raised hackles.

He just blinked before bringing his cold gaze back to Nancy, his eyes flashed with something Steve couldn't decipher and Billy gave her a charming smirk, leaning forward so his shirt would hang low and show off his defined chest. "Oh, yeah? What'd you have in mind?" If the display he'd just made wasn't enough, the blonde's tone was *extremely* suggestive. Steve froze, a familiar emotion bubbling in his gut, *jealously*. He didn't know why he'd be jealous of Billy, considering that he'd grown out of his highschool infatuation with Nancy since she had moved on with Jonathan. And, last he checked, their long distance relationship was still going strong. The feeling was odd and so out of character for him that he only came out of his confused daze when the smell of burning registered.

He cursed, fumbling with the spatula before taking the pancake out of the pan, the side that had been touching the heated metal was a solid black and smoking. Steve groaned, already grieving the fallen breakfast food and decided to throw it away. If going to the trash can put him coincidentally closer to the dining room table where Nancy and Billy were chatting, no one had to know. He moved over, keeping an ear on the two teen's conversation as he did. "You, *uh*. I'm not interested...in you...like that." Nancy struggled with finding an explanation under Billy's flirtatious attitude and Steve had to refrain from going to her rescue. It was good that they were getting along... *right?*

"I meant...as friends?" It sounded like a question and Steve winced

when Billy's grin fell back into an annoyed sneer. Nancy flinched at the expression change and Billy plastered a painfully fake smile onto his face before responding in a false cheerful tone. "I'm sorry, but trying to be nice to you makes me irrationally *pissed*." The whole thing was followed up with an alarming, sharp grin and Nancy beat a hasty retreat, leaving the two of them alone again. Steve felt something like relief flood him when they separated and Billy brought his glacial blue eyes back to brunette's motionless form.

"You are so not wasting that pancake. Give it." Billy demanded, gaze jumping from Steve's face to the half-charred flapjack. The brunette scrunched his nose at the other teen, moving the plate that held the inedible morsel out of grabbing distance. "It's *burnt*." The brunette rationalized, side-eyeing the trash can. Unfortunately, Billy was undeterred by the notion of eating the blackened pancake. "So? It'll taste fine." The blonde waved his fork, almost as if he were trying to physically swat away Steve's reluctance. The brunette brandished his spatula at the salivating teen with a stern expression, there was *no* way he was giving Billy this sorry excuse for a pancake. "Billy-"

"I can't hear you over the sound of that flapjack hitting my plate." Steve thought about arguing his point further, but was stopped when Billy began pounding his hands -that were still clutching his silverware- onto the table like a five-year-old throwing a tantrum until Steve rolled his eyes and caved. The blonde hissed an excited 'yes' before digging into the horribly burnt pancake with gusto. The brunette snorted at Billy's enthusiasm, reaching out to swipe his finger over the thick layer of strawberry jam that had been slathered on top of the charred flapjack.

Billy froze, his fork halfway to his gaping maw as his wide eyes followed the digit's path to Steve's parted lips. The brunette popped the digit into his mouth and slurped the sweet topping off his skin, humming as the bold taste of strawberries hit his tongue. The blonde's fingers flexed at the low sound, his fork slipping from his loosened grip and landing on the plate with a loud clatter that startled them both. Billy shut his mouth with a sharp click, his sharp gaze snapping down to glare at the fallen utensil like it had personally betrayed him. "Dude, Billy-" Steve started with an amused tilt to his mouth and Billy went pink, quickly cutting the brunette off

as he picked his fork back up to aggressively cut into the black pancake. “Yeah, whatever.”

Steve let out a bellowing laugh at the blonde’s odd behavior, clutching at the table as he giggled. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d just *laughed*. His life seemed like he was destined to go from one horror to another, with no breaks between for a breather. There was always more disorders and trauma to stack on top of Steve’s -already heavy- pile of crap he carried around. “Steve?” A hesitant voice called out and the brunette finally noticed Billy standing next to him, pancake forgotten. The blonde looked worried, an adorable furrow between his lowered brows that Steve wanted to reach out and smooth over with his fingers... *his lips*. The taller teen shook himself, having no idea where *that* thought had come from. “Sorry. Did you need something?”

“You good? You were laughing and then you just *stopped*. It was weird.” Billy placed a cool hand onto one of Steve’s, which were still gripping at the edge of the wooden table. He relaxed his desperate grasp and flexed his aching fingers before replying. “Yeah, I’m fine.” Man, if he had a dime for every time he said that. Billy’s eyes narrowed, searching for any signs that the brunette was lying, and finding it in the minute trembling of Steve’s hands. Though, the blonde didn’t call him out on it, he simply nodded and led the older teen to sit down next to him before finishing his pancake.

“I thought that those pills were supposed to help with this kinda shit.” It was said like a statement, but Steve knew that it was actually meant as a question. Billy was quite brash and his concern often came across as either condescending or rude. The elder boy took a moment to figure out a way to put something so abstract into words, but if Billy could do it, Steve would try. “My prescriptions aren’t meant to fix everything, dependence on any kind of drug can be dangerous. I still have my triggers and bad days, but the medication is kind of like a crutch. Healing from mental stuff like I deal with is mostly just knowing which coping mechanisms to use in what scenario.”

The blonde nodded along with Steve’s explanation, polishing off the last of his jam-soaked flapjack as he did. “Teach me.” Billy said it so quietly that Steve almost missed the words, the younger teen staring

resolutely down at his empty plate. "Come again?" Steve felt the need to clarify that yes, he'd just heard what he had heard. Billy became agitated at the brunette's further questioning, shifting in his seat and gritting his teeth. "I fucking told you to teach me the goddamn mechanisms or whatever, asshole." The blonde blurted self-consciously, rubbing his palms across his thighs.

"I just...I don't like seeing you like that." He admitted after a brief pause and Steve felt like all the oxygen had been pulled out of the room. "I don't know how to help and it makes me feel useless." He muttered and Steve smiled, the only people who knew how to handle Steve's attacks were Robin and Dustin. The rest of The Party didn't know, but the brunette kept it that way on purpose. He had no doubt that they would want to help, but he didn't want to burden the already high-strung kids. It would help to have another player on his side when it came to his many mental disorders.

"Yeah. I would appreciate that." Steve felt something within him melt. Billy was... *different*. Kinder. It was easy to forget how the boy had been before his death. Easy to forget the gray skin and claws. *Easy* to look past the fact he wasn't *human* anymore. The brunette shook himself out of his daze, realizing that he was still staring at the blonde, Billy took Steve's soft gaze in stride and shrugged. "Bitchin'. I'm hungry."

## 5. Chapter 5

“You can’t *possibly* be hungry still.” Even as he said it, Steve was moving into the kitchen in order to scrounge up for something for Billy to snack on, the blonde eagerly following. The brunette rummaged through cabinets as Billy lingered close behind, so close in fact that Steve could feel the cold wafting off him. The teen radiated an icy chill like humans did heat, it was odd, like standing next to a corpse. If a corpse could have perfect tan skin and walk around.

Steve found a unopened bag of jumbo beef jerky and snagged it, turning to hand it off to the vibrating blonde. Billy carefully took it from him, their hands briefly brushing before Steve let go. “Uh, that okay?” Steve nodded at the bag that Billy was already tearing into and the blonde paused, looking up at Steve with a grin. “Yeah. Thanks.” He shoved one of his hands inside to collect a thick piece with Steve following suit, taking his own hunk from the bag. The two silently shared the snack, alternating who got to take a piece. They were nearing the bottom of the bag when Max came into the kitchen.

“Hey shitbird. Whatcha want?” Billy mumbled out around the hunk of meat that he’d savagely stuffed into his mouth. The ginger rolled her eyes at the familiar nickname as she stepped past them, going for the snack cabinet that Steve had just been digging in earlier. “The Party wants popcorn.” She retrieved a pack of butter-lovers and tossed it into the microwave before hitting a button. The machine powered on and the paper bag began to spin. She turned back to the pair with a bored look before Steve reached for the bag again, the motion catching her attention.

Her eyes brightened and she stood up straight before approaching them, hand reaching for the bag in Billy’s grasp. Max’s grasp caught air as the blonde moved it away from her greedy fingers. “I don’t think so.” He growled and the ginger rolled her eyes. “God, why are you always such a douchebag?” She turned to Steve, who was holding a large piece of teriyaki jerky and Max made a ‘*gimme*’ motion with her hand. The brunette snorted and began to hand her the meat, but was stopped by a gray claw shooting out and gripping his wrist so tight that his bones ground together.



“No.” Billy’s voice had become odd again, dark and disorienting like the feeling Steve got when entering the tunnels of the Upside Down. Steve saw Max visibly hesitate and decided to take over the situation to try and derail the rage that he saw building in Billy’s glacial eyes. The younger teen was unpredictable and it didn’t help that they still didn’t know all of his triggers. “Hey, Billy. It’s alright. I *want* to share.” Steve gestured for Max to leave with his free hand, seeing as the blonde still had to break the intense eye contact that he had with the girl.

The ginger slunk out of the room, Billy watching her the whole time. Once she moved out of eyesight, Steve attempted to take the jerky bag from Billy and the blonde came to life. The room dropped in temperature as the teen yanked the bag from his grasp, eyes wild and foggy. He pushed Steve away from him, the brunette barely keeping himself from crashing into the counter as the blonde tore through cabinets, throwing things in a fury. “Billy stop!” The brunette pleaded, following the enraged blonde from a distance as he destroyed the kitchen. “Please, it’s alright. You can have the jerky. It’s fine.”

Billy ignored him and began to smash various ceramic bowls and mugs onto the floor making it so the brunette couldn’t reach him. The commotion drew both Robin and Nancy to the room, the two of them having most likely told the kids to stay put. Steve motioned for them to not come any closer, the last thing he wanted was for one of them to be caught in the crossfire. “Billy.” He raised a hand to touch the blonde, and that’s when everything went to shit.

Billy picked up a plate and shattered it on the cabinet door next to his head, making his ears ring and his breathing speed up. The glass shards rained over him and he was moving, he didn’t care where as long as it was away from Billy, away from the pain that was likely to come with the blonde’s anger. He didn’t hear Robin and Nancy calling out to him, he didn’t notice his bare feet being shredded by glass as he scrambled back, he didn’t see Billy’s skin return to its normal color or register his low, pleading voice. It was all lost to the white noise of panic and the need to get away. Get away. *Get away.*

His breathing hitched as his back hit the floor, he could feel Will’s ominous drawings wrinkling under his body, his head throbbing in

time to the onslaught of fists pounding into his temples. Then there were hands grabbing his face and he realized that he wasn't breathing, but even with this knowledge he couldn't make his lungs expand to take in the air he so desperately needed. His vision was swimming, blonde curls and blue eyes coming in and out of focus as his world began to dim.

"Bil...let us...elp him!" Voices came in waves as he faded, then he was weightless. It was disorienting and terrifying, but he could do nothing to stop the terrible feeling of being out of control. Then he was falling. He landed on something soft, the impact forcing him to inhale a deep breath only to immediately begin coughing. There were multiple hands touching him, pushing him upright a cold body slid between him and whatever soft furniture he was on, he used the feeling to ground himself. Finally, the blind panic subsided and the concerned voices registered.

"Oh my God, Steve! What the fuck was that!?" The brunette was able to distinguish Max's shrieking, voice high from the combination of anger and fear. He opened his eyes to see her blurry form clutching to Lucas like a lifeline, the young boy staring at him with wide, frightened eyes. "Don't yell, it'll only make it worse." Robin chides the girl, one of her hands resting on his shoulder. Steve shivered, the cold sweat causing goosebumps to rise across his flushed skin. A blanket was thrown over him before hands began rubbing over his arms, creating friction to help warm him up.

"*Bills.*" Steve managed to slur out. He was exhausted and just wanted to sleep for the next thousand years. Nancy came around the back of the couch and into view, giving him a weak smile. "Billy's right behind you Steve." She stated and he noticed that he was slightly elevated, reclined across the entire length of their sectional. There were knees bracketing the brunette as a body curled protectively around him. It was *Billy*. Petting his sweaty hair and murmuring reassurances into his ear. "Bambi, I'm so, so sorry. I wasn't thinking and it got you hurt. *Fuck.*"

And Steve seconded that sentiment, he felt like shit and the soles of his feet were beginning to burn from where they sat in Dustin's lap, the boy plucking glass out of his skin with tweezers and putting it into an empty Chinese food container that had been sitting on the

coffee table. Robin wasn't in the room anymore, but he could faintly hear someone shuffling about the kitchen, and guessed that she was most likely cleaning up the glass and blood. Erica began to bandage his feet with Dustin's help after the older boy slathered his soles with an obscene amount of Neosporin.

"Billy." He rasped out, throat sore as if he'd been screaming, which he probably had if he's being honest with himself. "Hey, Stevie. I'm here. What do you need?" Billy asked, holding onto Steve as he thought that if he let go the brunette would fall apart. Steve barely had the energy to motion for something to drink before his hand was dropping back to the plush cushions of the couch, Billy catching his heavy limb before it could land and gently set it down. Dustin nodded -seemingly done with his task of bandaging Steve's feet-before running off to fetch a glass. Dustin was back in seconds, holding one of the cups that had managed to survive Billy's outburst, Robin calmly following behind the boy.

"There you go. Take your time and *no* chugging, you'll throw up." Dustin handed off the water to Billy, who held it steady enough for Steve to drink, hands too shaky to even try and attempt such a feat. "I feel like shit." The brunette groaned when he began to feel a bit more human. He relaxed into Billy, fully embracing the comfort that was being freely given by the usually distant blonde. "You *look* like shit." Erica pointed out unhelpfully and she was greeted by several flat looks. She visibly deflated and Steve patted her hip to comfort her.

"What happened?" He was addressing the room at large, so anyone was free to explain if they felt like it. Not only were his episodes draining for him, but also for those who helped calm him down, which he understood and hated in equal measure. Robin was the first to speak up, having witnessed him like this several times. Not to say that it got any easier for her, just that she's had some time to establish a system to help her adjust. "Max came flying into the room like a bat outta hell, but before we could ask what was wrong, we heard a commotion. Nancy and I told the kids to wait while we checked it out. We saw you attempt to calm Billy and watched as he smashed a plate by your head-" She's interrupted by Mike, who sneered at the person currently behind Steve.

“Just like at the Byer’s house. You never change Hargrove.” Steve sent the pale gremlin a warning look as Billy went tense against him. The brunette began to placate the blonde with soft touches, brushing his thumb across the knuckles of the tan hand clutching at his waist. Robin acted as if Mike had never spoken and continued. “It got scary. Your breathing became choppy and you weren’t responding to any of us. I knew what was happening, and tried to help, but then you stepped on broken glass trying to get away and Billy...Billy wouldn’t let us near you once he realized that you’d been hurt.”

Steve strained his neck trying to look at the blonde for confirmation that yes, that is what happened. He felt a nod at his back and turned to face forward again, waiting for Robin to continue. “Billy collected himself, but your breathing got worse and worse. Then you tripped and fell and you just stopped breathing altogether. It was *terrifying*. We convinced Billy that you needed something to shock your lungs into working and he picked you up. *God*, you were so still, it was like you were already dead.” Robin lamented and Steve felt a wave of guilt crash over him, causing tears to well up in his eyes before dripping down his face, surprising everyone in the room.

“I’m sorry.” It didn’t matter how many times he said it, he could never begin to atone for what he put his friends through. For what he puts *Robin* through. She may act like she doesn’t mind, but Steve has heard her sobbing when she thought he was asleep after a particularly bad episode. It wasn’t fair to the Party if he got them involved and *this* is exactly what he had been trying to avoid by keeping them out of it. Their terrified, pitying faces as he sobbed. “Hey, you’re fine. No hard feelings.” Nancy said gently and reached out to touch him, but Billy stopped her with a threatening growl.

“*Jesus*.” Mike hissed under his breath, glaring at the blonde as he tugged Nancy away, her big doe eyes glittering with sympathetic tears. After giving Steve a moment to collect himself, Robin rushed to finish catching him up so that they could put the whole episode behind them and do something else. “You were dropped onto the couch and as soon as you began breathing again, Billy wrapped himself around you like a security blanket.” She said the last bit with the hint of a smile and Steve snorted wetly, halfheartedly smacking at the smug girl.

"Can we watch a movie?" Steve asked quietly and the kids climbed onto the couch to surround him. "Yeah sure." Robin picked out a chill flick, Steve spotting the cover and smiling, '*The Never Ending Story*' title greeting him. Steve snuggled into the pile with a grin, he actually recharged by hanging out with his friends and most of the Party already knew this fact, so they were very tactile with him. Especially if he was having a hard time, which was more often than not nowadays.

Three hours later, the group was watching '*The Goonies*' when the doorbell rang. Steve heaved himself up, disrupting the pile of teenagers around him, to their very vocal displeasure. He padded over to the front door, peering out the peephole to see who it was, since it was still a bit early for Joyce to have arrived yet. Or not... cause at the door was Jonathan, holding a sleepy looking Will in a piggyback. The teen smiled at the peephole as if he knew Steve was there. "You got a secret password or something?"

The Byers had arrived an hour early, Joyce probably having broken several traffic laws in order to get there as soon as possible, and Steve *wished* that he could be surprised. The mother of two -now three- had shown her willingness to do some crazy shit during their many battles against the Upside Down. Steve threw the door open and pulled Jonathan into a tight hug, the other boy laughing as he tried to keep himself steady, his hands occupied by his sleeping brother.

The chuckling died off with a choked noise and Steve pulled away, noticing that Jonathan was now staring at something over Steve's shoulder. Having an inkling of what he was staring at, Steve turned to follow his gaze and, sure enough, Billy was lurking behind him, blackened hands clutching the doorway as he stared at...Will. Oh *shit*. Steve didn't even think about the blonde would react to the boy, both of them having been possessed by the same creature and used. "Is that...?" Jonathan trailed off as he gawked at the wary looking blonde, Steve gave the other brunette a reassuring smile and nodded.

"Yeah. Yeah, it's Billy." Jonathan handed Will to Steve before stepping past him, moving toward the distrustful blonde. The teen disregarded Billy's obvious uncertainty and pulled him into a one armed hug. The younger teen tensed, keeping stock still until the other male let go. "Glad to see you, Hargrove." Jonathan gave Billy a

genuine smile, squeezing his shoulder before moving away. The blonde remained stationary for a few moments, dumbstruck. Steve gently grasped Billy's wrist with his free hand, readjusting Will on his hip before pulling the blonde away from the door he was blocking.

"Come on. Joyce and El can't be far behind." Billy was radiating nervous energy the entire time he followed behind the brunette, filled with questions and emotion. He lasted up until Steve laid Will on the couch among the rest of the excited Party members, who immediately woke the boy up. "Do- did...I know that guy? I mean, I recognize the kid, but not him." Billy was rambling and the brunette decided to have mercy on the teen.

"Yeah, no. You don't know Jonathan. He'd barely even interacted with the Mind Flayer. Will though, it's...complicated. And kinda traumatic so don't bring it up, alright?" The blonde nodded absentmindedly, getting that look in his eyes that told Steve he was digging into his scrambled mind to try and figure things out. "Hey, don't stress about it. They're nice." Just after he'd finished talking, Billy flew backward, crashing through the door to the guest bedroom as if pulled by a string.

Several things happened at once. The kids began screaming, rushing towards where Steve assumed the front door was, the brunette himself began making his way over to where Billy had disappeared, to the distress of the others. The apartment went absolutely *arctic* as the light in the room Billy had flown into flickered ominously. There was more yelling from behind him as a black claw wrapped around the cracked door frame, all the lights in the house going out simultaneously. An unnatural darkness covered the windows, making the house become doused in pitch black even in the middle of the day.

Steve heard growling and clicking echoing throughout the darkness and briefly saw something dart past the open front door. "Shut the door! Don't let him out!" Steve called and the door swung shut by itself, lock clicking without anyone even being near it. El then. *God*, this was a shitfest. He flattened himself against the wall, keeping his back covered so Billy couldn't sneak up on him. Last he checked, everyone else was in the living room or near the front door, which was a relief.

"I'm not sure what frame of mind he's in so stay as a group. He might go after stragglers." Steve yelled out into the room, it was still pretty dark, but his eyes were finally adjusting, allowing him to make out shapes. "What about you, you idiot! You're alone!" Robin informed him angrily, her voice sounding like it came from behind the couch. The brunette's eyes widened as he realized that, yeah, he was right where he shouldn't be. *Awesome*. Okay so, first things first, don't panic. Easier said than done, ever since he woke up to find Billy in his kitchen, his day had been an absolute roller coaster of emotions and adrenaline.

He raced through the day's events, trying to remember where he'd last placed his bat. His mind drew a blank, doing a petulant *fuck you* as it up and abandoned him to the unfolding chaos, apparently done with the abuse he put it through for one Billy Hargrove. At least it seemed like El had calmed down and wasn't planning on any more surprise attacks. There was a chittering sound as something big came up on his left and Steve froze, hoping that Billy wasn't about to tear him apart. Instead of any of the mauling that the brunette was expecting, a large claw engulfed his *entire waist* and dragged him closer to a freezing, emaciated form.

His heart skipped a beat as Steve realized that Billy was a fucking *Demogorgon*, or a least some kind of variation of the creature. He didn't get to linger on it long, cause next thing he knew, the lights were back on and a *human* Billy was leaning his weight into Steve's back. His breathing was fast and his forehead rested on the back of the brunette's neck, as if he were using the older teen's body to hide. "You uh-" Steve's voice cracked and he cleared his throat, licking his lips before trying again. "You good, man?"

"Yeah. That was insane." Steve found himself laughing at the absurdity of it all. The undead, mutated teen who fucking died three months ago after being possessed by a creature from another dimension that woke up because Russians opened a rift underneath the Starcourt Mall, was baffled by a little girl with the ability to move shit with her mind. Just... *wow*. His life. "That's El that you just met." Billy shook with laughter, snorting rather unattractively. "One hell of an introduction." The two just stood in the hallway, shoulders shaking as they hysterically giggled, probably projecting their shared

lack of sanity. No one went through what they had and came out completely unscathed.

“Steve.” A monotone female voice called out and the brunette sighed, rubbing at his face to try and brace himself. Time to face the music.



## 6. Chapter 6

### Summary for the Chapter:

“Steve...” Joyce called out from behind him, voice shaky. Everyone in the kitchen turned to face her, the woman staring warily into the drawer filled with broken magnets. “What’s wrong with these?”

Steve’s face twisted into confusion as he took in her pale features and wide eyes. “Well, they won’t stick to the fridge anymore.”

### Notes for the Chapter:

Hey, hey! Another chapter done! Phew, that took a hot minute, just glad to have it posted finally! Hope you enjoy!

Thanks for reading! : )

The group relocated to the living room so that he could inform everyone of the situation at the same time, rather than repeating the same story over and over. “Hey El. Sorry about the surprise. I thought Joyce told you.” Now that he thought about it, Jonathan also looked shocked to see Billy standing there, so maybe Joyce didn’t inform *any* of her kids of what exactly they were walking into. Steve turned to Joyce, who was sitting next to Will on the couch and she had the tact to at least look guilty. “I didn’t want Will to worry. If Billy is back, then what does that mean for the Mind Flayer?”

*“It’s dead.”* Billy snarled out immediately after Joyce had finished voicing her concerns, several people flinching at the vehemence in his tone. He seemed to take notice of the discomfort permeating the room and took a couple deep breaths, loosening the fists that had tightened at his side at the outburst. “I assure you, it’s dead.” Billy repeated in a much more level voice, lightly grasping the hem of Steve’s red jumper in a desperate bid for support. The brunette pointedly ignored how Joyce and Robin eyed the hand that Billy had latched onto his clothing, changing the subject by jumping into a

recap of the morning. It was amazing how much happened during seven hours that he'd been awake.

Everyone thankfully stayed silent until the end, allowing him to get through the run-down relatively quickly. "I apologize." El's voice echoed throughout the otherwise silent apartment and Billy was surprised enough to actually separate from Steve to give the girl a shocked look. He collected himself in record time and cleared his throat. "It's no problem, you just...caught me off guard is all. Brought up a lot of emotions and stuff, but I uh, don't think they were mine." Billy huffed a frustrated noise, wringing his fingers together anxiously. "It's all so jumbled, it's hard to make sense of shit sometimes."

"No, I get it. You have nothing to apologize for." Will spoke up, standing up from the couch and coming to stand in front of Billy, looking up at the taller teen with empathy. The blonde stared at the kid, sorting through emotions and compartmentalizing, before reaching out to ruffle Will's hair affectionately. "Thanks, kid." Billy dropped his hand, turning his attention back to Steve. Will took the gesture for the dismissal it was and made his way over to El, the two whispering conspiratorially to each other.

Billy regained Steve's attention by tugging at the cloth he had in his grip, the brunette raising a questioning brow at the grinning blonde. "I'm hungry." Steve groaned at the younger teens words, dragging the other male with him towards the kitchen, Billy's boisterous laughter following them as they went. As Steve scoured the fridge, Billy jumped up onto the counter to sit down, legs kicking back and forth as they dangled. The brunette managed to unearth a tater tot hot-dish that Robin made a few days ago, throwing the whole pan into the oven to heat it up. Steve had no doubt that the blonde could -and would- eat the entire thing and *still* ask for more.

The brunette thought ahead and was already looking for more leftover food that wasn't too unfit for human consumption, which just reminded him that he *really* needed to clean out the fridge. He dug up a container of homemade chicken noodle soup, some nacho ingredients, and a McDonald Big Mac. Steve gave Billy the hamburger first after a quick detour to the microwave, hopefully Robin could forgive him for sacrificing her burger. As the blonde

happily inhaled the offered food, Steve got a pot to throw onto the stove, turning the dial to medium high heat for the soup.

He put the cheese, olives, ground beef, chips, diced tomatoes, salsa and sour cream onto the counter next to the blonde's hip, smacking the messy hand that reached out in an attempt to snatch some. The brunette then grabbed a plate to begin constructing the pile of nachos. He just ends up layering the ingredients so that he could use the rest of the bag of chips while keeping the toppings evenly distributed. Billy watched as Steve put together the platter, stirring the soup, before popping the nachos into the microwave to melt the cheese. Once warm, he gave the blonde the plate along with two bowls, one filled with sour cream and the other salsa.

"You're welcome." Steve smiled as Billy absolutely demolished the food, hands quickly becoming dirty. The whole scene just reminded him of a toddler trying to eat and he had to hide a fond laugh behind a loud cough. Billy's eyes narrowed in suspicion and Steve turned his attention to the soup, flicking the stove off when it was hot enough before pouring it into a large glass bowl. Once that was finished, Steve slid the bowl over to the blonde and checked the reheated hot-dish before turning off the oven, keeping it inside so that it wouldn't cool before Billy was ready to eat it. Which was apparently not an issue, seeing as the blonde was already almost done chugging the bowl of chicken noodle soup.

*God*, Steve hoped that he didn't choke.

After he finished every prepared meal, Billy let out a disgustingly loud belch, Steve wrinkling his nose and shoving at the smug teen. "Now what?" Steve inquired and the blonde shrugged. The two were interrupted by the Party, brought into the kitchen by the smell of food, which was unfortunately, already gone. As the gaggle of children piled into the room, Steve glanced at the clock, the glowing numbers telling him that it was about half past noon, meaning that the kids needed lunch.

"Feed me!" Dustin screamed as he barreled into the room accidentally slamming into Max, who hit him back with a feral snarl, the whole situation rapidly escalating into a brawl. But before Steve could step in, El was taking Max's fist into her hand, uncurling the

tightened knuckles in order to lace their fingers together.

Steve held back the almost overwhelming urge to coo at the couple, knowing that if he made any sort of noise, Max would most likely pummel him. “I am *not* cooking. We’re getting takeout.” The Party members cheered and swarmed the fridge, a collective whine ringing out when they realized that the appliance was bare of any menus. “Where’s the goods, Steve?” Lucas demanded, hands on his hips in an adorable imitation of the brunette. Steve let out a chuckle at the display and collected the menus from the drawer he’d shoved them in, moving the magnets out of the way.

As soon as he turned with the laminated paper, the kids were snatching them out of his hands to mutter over, debating what to get from where. A tanned hand came into view, plucking the menu for the Italian restaurant in town out of his hands and Steve raised an eyebrow at the grinning blonde. “No way.” Steve giggled and Billy’s smile widened, tongue peeking out to lick across his top row of teeth. “Whatcha want, Pretty Boy?” Steve felt himself blush under the attention and stumbled with his words. He ended up giving up on trying to speak and just pouted, the blonde saddling up next to him to share the menu.

Steve grabbed a notebook off of the counter and jotted down his and Billy’s orders before the rest of the group could bombard him. He made the kids go one at a time, scribbling down names and specifics next to each order so he knew who got what when the food arrived. “Now remember, the food is going to get here at different times since you all ordered from different places. I won’t make you wait for everyone else’s to arrive to eat, but you can if you want to.” Steve already knew that Max and El would wait to eat together, being the sappy couple that they were.

Joyce, Nancy, Jonathan and Robin enter the room after the kids had filed out, Robin smacking Steve’s chest playfully. “We had the presence of mind to wait until *after* the gremlins were done in here.” She grinned at him, taking the notebook from him to write down her own order, not even bothering to look at a menu. One thing Steve learned while living with her, was that Robin was stupidly good with memorization, which explained why she was fluent in Russian now. Steve could barely remember the basics of Spanish that he’d done his

last two years of high school.

“Steve...” Joyce called out from behind him, voice shaky. Everyone in the kitchen turned to face her, the woman staring warily into the drawer filled with broken magnets. “What’s wrong with these?” Steve’s face twisted into confusion as he took in her pale features and wide eyes. “Well, they won’t stick to the fridge anymore.” The brunette noticed Billy shuffle forward, so that he was blocking Steve with his body. Joyce picked up one of the faulty magnets and shuffled over to the fridge. Jonathan and Steve shared a look before the former attempted to calm his mother.

“Mom. You’re acting weird. What is it?” Joyce disregarded her son in favor of putting the pale blue stone onto the fridge, watching as it just fell when she released it. The six people present just stare down at the magnet like it was something they’d never seen before; as if it were an unsolvable puzzle. “I’ve seen this before,” Joyce’s voice is thin, panic bubbling just under the surface. “When the rift had opened under the mall. There was a mass blackout and all of mine were demagnetized too.” Five pairs of eyes gravitated to Billy, who was standing next to Steve, tense. Then it clicked. The footprints coming from the unblemished wall, the magnets, the flickering lights.

“You opened a gateway, didn’t you?” Steve’s tone wasn’t accusatory, but rather filled with shock and awe. The only person he knew that could manipulate gateways was El, and even then she could only really *close* them. Billy’s body language answered for him as the blonde became defensive. “I closed it right after, I wouldn’t do anything to get you hurt. You gotta believe me.” He desperately pleaded with Steve, hands grabbing at the brunette’s arms as the blonde worked himself up. “I’m not- I wouldn’t. *Please*.” Steve rested a hand over the blonde’s shaking one, squeezing it reassuringly.

“It’s okay. I believe you.” The brunette soothed before letting his hand fall back to his side. They’d pick up the topic, as well as implications of Billy being able to open *and* close gateways to the Upside Down, at a later date. For now they needed to talk about plans. Where Billy was going to stay and such. “You’re okay, sweetheart. Why don’t you just go wait for the food to arrive with the kids?” Joyce offered, motherly instincts kicking at the sight of the damaged boy. Billy pried himself from Steve’s side and made his way

to the living room to join The Party in their shenanigans.

By the time they processed and met the others in the living room, Billy was nowhere to be seen. El and Will were absent from the group as well, so Steve wasn't too worried. "Billy went snooping and they followed him. Pretty sure they're in your room." Max informed him while picking at her nails, the epitome of nonchalance. Steve gave her his thanks, ruffling her cropped ginger hair before sitting down next to her, throwing an arm over the back of the couch so that she could shuffle closer. Joyce allowed time for the rest to settle before addressing their prominent issue.

"I believe it would be in everyone's best interest if you took some time off work and had Billy stay here with you, Steve." Steve's head whipped over to the woman so fast that he startled several people and something in his neck popped. " *What?* Why can't you take him? *You're* the adult!" The brunette's voice came out shrill and panicked, Dustin placing a reassuring hand on his leg as Joyce gave him a smile that was half amusement, half understanding.

"Sweetheart, I would but I live in the next state over. Besides, the kids and I are currently staying in a motel, so it's already a bit cramped." She did sound genuinely apologetic and Steve deflated some. Dustin's face lights up as he suddenly gets an idea. "What about Nancy and Mike? They kept El for a period of time." He mused, looking questioningly at his friend and shrugging.

"No. We still have agents come around asking about El and searching the house." Mike said venomously, clearly not on board with Billy being anywhere *near* him. Nancy stepped up next to her brother, placing a placating hand on his shoulder, which he tolerated with a frown. "Sorry Steve." She apologized, basically confirming that no, Mike was not lying to get out of it. Steve then wondered if any of the other kids were being harassed or if it was just the Wheelers. Robin and himself certainly hadn't had any run-ins with any sort of government figure, well, none they noticed at least.

"Dude. He totally doesn't like Mike *or* Nancy, so sending him off with either of them would be a terrible idea regardless." Lucas piped in, sending a disapproving look Dustin's way for even suggesting the Wheeler siblings. Steve had to agree with Lucas, Billy wasn't very

quiet about his dislike, the blonde having shown clear signs of aggression with both siblings. “Well, he *can’t* go with me. There’s no way we’re bringing him back to that house, *ever*.” Max stated heatedly and no one disagreed. A morose silence descended upon the room and Steve broke it with a desperate plea.

“What about everyone else?” The people filling the room exchanged several looks, silently communicating with one another as they tried to figure out a plan. Joyce, of course, is the one to speak up with words of wisdom. “All the kids have homes where the adults are blissfully unaware of the Upside Down and it’s repercussions. Steve, it *has* to be you and Robin. Honey, I don’t see any other options.” Steve pinched the bridge of his nose between his forefinger and thumb and sighed, rubbing at the oily skin as if the action would make all of his problems go away.

“You sure that’s what Billy wants?” He tried one last time to wiggle his way out of playing babysitter, but his hopes were immediately crushed by his meddling roommate. “Oh, I’m sure he’ll be ecstatic.” Robin said with an odd lilt in her tone, a smirk on her face. Steve had no idea what exactly that was supposed to imply, but he felt like he *should* be insulted and acted accordingly, leveling his roommate the mother of all bitch faces. When all she did was waggle her manicured eyebrows at him, he gave up trying to make her feel shame and slid a hand down his face, silently asking for strength.

“Fine. I’ll call in.”

\* \* \*

By the time Steve had completed his phone call and returned, all the food had arrived, his guests spreading out to eat happily. He spotted Robin and made his way over to her. Upon noticing him, she patted the ground next to her, motioning him to sit down. Once comfortable, she handed him his chicken alfredo along with a plastic fork and he eagerly dug into the mouthwatering pasta. “My boss only gave me till next Tuesday.” Steve mumbled out around his mouthful of noodles, sauce dripping down his chin. A pile of scratchy napkins slapped him in the face, Robin’s snorting laugh telling him that she was the culprit behind the attack.

He begrudgingly wiped his face, glaring at his giggling roommate from over the edge of the napkin. "That's seven days! Plenty of time to get Billy accustomed to things." She said after he'd dropped the itchy paper from his cleaned face. Steve scowled at the peppy teen, shaking his head in exasperation. "Robin, he's not a dog." The brunette deadpanned to Robin's obvious amusement. Her face became serious as she considered Steve's statement before nodding in agreement. "You're right. He's more like a feline...or a bird."

"Oh my God." Steve ignored her in favor of shoveling more food into his mouth, almost choking with her next words. "He's only a puppy with *you*." Robin mused, pointing at Steve as if to cement the statement as fact. "No." Steve narrowed his eyes at the grinning girl, daring her to say otherwise. "Yes." Okay, so he wasn't surprised that she called his bluff, but he wasn't done arguing his point. The two of them had a habit of lowering themselves to immature levels when in a disagreement and this time was no different.

"No!"

"Yes!"

"*Ugh!*" Steve dragged a pillow off of the couch and threw it at her head, the girl catching it with a laugh. "In all seriousness, I think that this is gonna be good for you. You hang on to a lot of guilt, Steve. Maybe this will help." Robin nudged his shoulder with his and Steve looked up at her, smiling when he saw her genuine concern and hope. She shoved another jalapeño popper into her mouth and he pulled his eyes away, staring down at his pasta. "Yeah...maybe."

Robin swallowed, frowning. She opened her mouth to say something else, most likely something pertaining to Steve's pessimism, but was interrupted by Will and El rushing into the room. They searched the area with their wide eyes, sprinting over when they spotted Steve. Will took his free hand, encouraging Steve to his feet with insistent tugs before the kid began dragging him towards the hallway leading to the rooms, talking a mile a minute. "Come on, you have to see this. Billy's acting so weird! Like, he's taking your clothes and stuff and...it's hard to explain, just *come on*." They reached the closed door to his room and Steve heard shuffling, familiar clicking noises muffled from the other side. He grabbed the knob and turned it.



With a gentle push, the door swung open.